
County and Regional Libraries in the United States

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THE FIRST FIFTY years of the American public library movement was characterized by the establishment of many small city and town libraries throughout the country. The second fifty years, beginning about 1900, saw increasing emphasis upon the development of larger units of library service, including county and regional libraries.

In his detailed analysis of public library government Joeckel¹ points out, "As currently used in the United States, the words 'county library' are loosely applied to any type of library service to a county or any considerable portion of it. Thus used, the term often gives an impression of unified service to the whole county which may or may not be the actual fact." He then classifies the various types of libraries and various combinations of governmental and geographical situations which may contribute to what is commonly called county library service. Included are: (1) libraries which are part of a county government, (2) libraries which are part of both a city and a county government, and (3) municipal libraries or libraries of other types which serve a county by contract. Geographically, they may serve the entire area of a county, or only a part, usually omitting the larger cities.

Some years later Morgan² explained, "Within these county libraries there exist so many variations in organization, size, income, governmental relations, and library procedure that the public concept evoked by the term 'county library' is, not surprisingly, often confused or inaccurate." She then used a simplification of the Joeckel classification, grouping county libraries into three kinds: independent, contract, and city-county.

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The inclusion of the whole variety and range of county library service in lists and statistics of county libraries has been the general practice. The notable exception is the Statistical Circular ³ published by the U.S. Office of Education. This list does not incorporate statistics for all libraries at the disposal of county residents, but only those set up under state law to operate as county libraries, or under county administration. It omits county libraries which provide their services through contractual agreements, and also municipal public libraries giving some county service but already reported in other statistical circulars or bulletins. It is especially useful, however, in supplying information about county libraries whose annual income is less than \$5,000 and therefore does not entitle them to mention in the latest edition of the A.L.A. list.⁴

The word "regional" as applied to library service also has taken on a number of different connotations. In 1937 Joeckel stated: "The words 'region' or 'regional' are being used in three senses in current writing on the extension of library service. These are: (1) To indicate library cooperation in a major geographical *region*, such as the Middle West; (2) To describe a *regional* public library system extending over a considerable area, such as a county library, a multiple-county library, or the Fraser Valley Demonstration Library in British Columbia; (3) To describe a type of branch library in a city or county public library system, as the Legler Regional Branch of the Chicago Public Library, or the Lancaster Regional Branch of the Los Angeles County Public Library."⁵

On other occasions, too, Joeckel relates his discussion of regional libraries principally to the second use of the word and is clearly thinking of a library area made up of a number of counties and/or other taxing districts.^{6, 7} In the *National Plan* he makes a distinction between "regional or multicounty libraries," "federated groups of libraries," and "special state districts." Harris,⁸ Merrill,^{9, 10} Garceau,¹¹ and Leigh¹² all use the term "regional library" as synonymous with "multicounty library," but they all recognize and discuss other types of regional library service as well. Harris refers to five district classes of regional library service, including: (1) special library districts, (2) state regional units, (3) state regional service centers, (4) federal-state-county service, and (5) multicounty libraries.

A more detailed analysis of the various types may be found in Merrill's compilations of information on regional and district libraries,

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to which reference has already been made.^{9, 10} In these publications the word "region" obviously refers to a district smaller than a state—a multiple-county area or a trade area—and except for New England inclusion is limited to cases in which laws or sections of laws permit units larger than a county, whether called regional or district or resting on contract with other counties. In New England, where emphasis is on the state and the town rather than the county, various contract provisions for town libraries are comprehended, as well as the arrangements under the Vermont state-regional law. Garceau¹³ refers to the emerging pattern of regions centering in field offices of the state library agency. Leigh agrees that the multicounty district is the most common regional library unit, but also recognizes the growing importance of the library districts constituted by state action and the public library organization of metropolitan areas as a reflection of the general government pattern. The problems and patterns of library coordination and consolidation in metropolitan areas are outlined with some care by Vieg¹⁴ and by Winslow.¹⁵ Winslow suggests as stages of evolution (1) cooperation, (2) coordination or federation, (3) voluntary consolidation, and (4) enforced consolidation, and indicates the conditions under which each type might be appropriate.

The gist of the matter is that in general usage the term "regional library" usually refers to a multicounty library. But the term "regional library service" is used interchangeably for the multicounty libraries of the Southeast and the Southwest; the *ad hoc* library districts of Illinois; the state-regional library service centers of Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and New York; and the various services for metropolitan areas being developed in the instances at Buffalo,^{16, 17} Los Angeles,¹⁸ and San Francisco.¹⁹ This distinction between terms was well made by Joeckel, "The term 'regional library service' . . . is used deliberately instead of 'regional library' since the essence of the proposal is a co-operative organization of *library service* rather than the governmental and administrative unit usually connoted by the term *library*."²⁰

The history of the first twenty-five years of county library development in America has been ably summarized by Long.²¹ Early county library laws in Indiana (1816) and in Wyoming (1886) did not result in any appreciable building of book service for rural districts. Sandoe²² states that Ohio started the first county library in 1898, and that Maryland pioneered with a book wagon serving a county in 1907.²⁴

Joeckel²³ accepts Long's authority²⁴ that county libraries for Hamilton and for Van Wert counties, Ohio, and for Washington County, Maryland, were all authorized by law in 1898. Concerning the rivalry between the two Ohio libraries Long explains, "Unquestionably the Hamilton County bill became a law five days before the Van Wert County bill, although the general county library bill to which Van Wert County stood sponsor was introduced earlier. The service in Hamilton County through deposit stations and the central library was in operation before Van Wert enjoyed library service, but it was simply an extension of privileges from the city library, and not, as in the case of Van Wert, a library created from the beginning as a county institution." Long gives April 9, 1898, as the date of incorporation of the Washington County Library, but 1901-02 as the first year of operation, and 1905 as that for the Maryland book wagon.²⁵ An early history setting forth Van Wert's claim as the pioneer county library appeared in 1914 and included a summary of all other county library developments up to that date.²⁶ Fair²⁷ compiled a list of articles on service organized by counties and other large units in 1935. A history of the Washington County Library²⁸ became available in 1951.

In general, county library development was irregular and slow until California's county library act of 1909 and county free library law of 1911. Both Long²⁴ and Joeckel²⁹ stress the leadership of the state librarian, James L. Gillis, in convincing the government, the people, and the librarians of California of the importance of county libraries at a strategic point in the history of libraries in the state.

Long³⁰ reports 200 counties over the nation as having county library service in 1925, among which were 42 of California's 58. By 1935 California and New Jersey were the only states mentioned by Sandoe³¹ and Morgan² in which county libraries were numerous and flourishing; although the only states without general laws for the establishment of such libraries in 1935 were Delaware, Idaho, North Dakota, and the New England group. Delaware already had a special county library law for Newcastle County, and New England was developing complete library coverage along other than county lines.

Referring to statistics compiled by the American Library Association, Morgan continues, ". . . in 1935 there were actually in operation only 225 county libraries in the continental United States with incomes of \$1,000 or more a year. Stimulated by improved legislation, state aid, and private grants, the movement again gained momentum, with the

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result that by March, 1944, 651 counties were organized for library service in the continental United States."² The latest revision of the A.L.A. statistical summary,⁴ that of 1949, lists 736 counties having county or regional library service. In this figure are 35 multicounty libraries serving 87 counties, and 109 counties securing services from state library extension agencies. Ten counties coterminous with cities were not included. The financial standard applying was "a minimum annual income of \$5,000 or 10 cents per capita, whichever is larger."⁴ Only 32 libraries met the A.L.A. minimum financial standard of \$1.50 per capita, and only 16 also met the A.L.A. minimum population standard of 25,000.

Much of this county and multicounty library development has taken place in the South, particularly in the Southeast. Harris⁸ attributes the growth to the fairly substantial amounts of state aid, to the presence and stimulation of the TVA, to the standards for high school libraries set by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, and to the fact that the lack of previous library development has made it easier to secure cooperation for service over a large area. She also recognizes the stimulation of the W.P.A. grants. Merrill³² and Martin,³³ too, emphasize the impetus state aid has given to the development of larger units of library service.

The TVA's encouragement of regional services is similarly mentioned by Pritchett,³⁴ and libraries are specifically cited as an example of such development by Lilienthal.³⁵ Morgan² points out that the earlier grants from the Julius Rosenwald Fund, in 1929, for the demonstration of county library service in seven southern states, really led to the sponsorship of W.P.A. library projects in the 1930's. A study of these Rosenwald county library demonstrations has been made by Wilson and Wight,³⁶ and a country-wide one of the extension of library service under the W.P.A. by Stanford.³⁷ Other important reviews of the spread of library service in the South are attributable to Barker,³⁸ and to Wilson and Milczewski.³⁹

In the North the most notable recent development of both county and regional library service is now taking place in New York State. A series of library studies begun in 1945 by the Division of Research of the State Education Department resulted in an interim summary by Crane⁴⁰ in 1947, and a final report by Armstrong and others⁴¹ in 1949. The studies included an evaluation of public library service in New York State, with suggestions for a division of the state into fifteen

regions, each to be served by a regional center. These centers were to be wholly state-supported and state-operated agencies, designed to perform functions that could be most effectively managed on a region-wide basis. Service was to be given directly to local public libraries and librarians, not to the general public, just as a wholesaler supplies the wants of the retailer.

The immediate result of the studies just cited was an appropriation of \$100,000 by the 1948 legislature, for the establishment of an experimental program in the Watertown region of the state, to last approximately three years. During the period a careful evaluation was made of the experiment, and as it was considered successful the plan was continued on a permanent basis. An interim report⁴² on it was made in 1950. In addition to their value for New York State, the studies related to the experiment became the basis of some of the later and more extensive research undertaken for the Public Library Inquiry by Armstrong,⁴³ Garceau,⁴⁴ and Leigh.⁴⁵

A second result of this concentrated attention on library needs in New York State was the organization of a Library Trustees Foundation and the appointment of a Governor's Committee on Library Aid, whose first report⁴⁶ was issued in 1950. It was primarily due to the trustees' interest and effort that a bill authorizing substantial aid to county library units was passed by the 1950 legislature. For the first year a state appropriation of \$1,000,000 was made. When fully operative, the maximum state financial aid to local libraries would be \$3,653,000 a year, approximately thirty-five per cent of the current amount provided by local taxation for library support. The formulas for the various state grants in New York State are summarized by Leigh,⁴⁷ and the regulations under which they are administered have been issued by the Commissioner of Education.⁴⁸

The question raised by Leigh whether this provision for state aid to county libraries will supersede or include the program for regional library service centers, such as the one at Watertown, has been explored in some detail by Bradley.⁴⁹ He suggests that the two plans would seem to be complementary, not competitive, the direct state aid being especially applicable to the more populous metropolitan areas, and the regional service centers to those unserved or dependent on existing small libraries. As of July 1, 1951, Bradley reports three county-wide plans operating under the 1950 law, these being in Chemung, Erie, and Schenectady. He tells of schemes outlined in four other

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counties, and of plans in the predraft stage in twenty-two more counties.

The particularly complex situation in Erie County, New York, is discussed by Mahoney,¹⁷ who designates the library there as the first of the federated kind of public library in the United States; although Bradley points out that it has not yet resulted in a complete amalgamation of the two metropolitan and the smaller outlying libraries into a consolidated county organization. Progress is steadily being made, however, according to the library's own annual reports.¹⁶ Plans for the development of regional library service on a state-wide basis are also proceeding in a number of other states,⁵⁰ notably in Washington, where the organization is based on a report by Bowerman.⁵¹

In 1923 both the American Library Association and the National Grange passed resolutions offering their belief that the county library system would bring to country residents opportunities more nearly equal to those of the city dweller, and so preserve and enrich farm life.³⁰ Subsequent experience has shown, and authorities in general agree, that with notable exceptions, the typical county in the United States is both too small in population and too limited in financial resources to provide adequate library service to rural areas. In moving toward larger units, however, many proponents of library extension still rely mainly on the county as a base for organization, and avoid creating *ad hoc* districts in disregard of county lines.

As Leigh puts it, "The library extension leaders who have accepted the concept . . . [of larger public library units for rural areas] have actually rejected the county as the universal unit for rural library organization. Even in California where large county libraries developed early as models for emulation, some of the counties lack the population and tax income considered adequate for full, modern library service."⁵² Garceau⁵³ and Leigh⁵⁴ both point out that the estimated minimum workable unit of population has changed from 25,000 to 40,000 to 200,000, and the proposed standards of expenditure from \$6,000 to \$25,000, to \$37,500, to \$60,000, and now to \$100,000.

The breakdown in the old distinction between "rural" and "urban" living also has an important bearing on the development of library service to rural people, as Kolb⁵⁵ suggests, and even nonlibrarians like Odum⁵⁶ and Reed⁵⁷ sense the implication for libraries of the accelerated development of metropolitan areas and of regional planning generally. Even the multicounty region and the metropolitan area

as units of library government seem inadequate to Garceau¹¹ and Leigh,⁵⁸ and they follow Joeckel,⁵⁹⁻⁶¹ Wilson,⁶² Noon,⁶³ and others in emphasizing the increasingly important role of the state in the strengthening and extension of library service—through stimulation and supervision, through state grants-in-aid, and through the administration of state-regional library service centers.

Nor has the role of the federal government in relation to library service been overlooked. Joeckel⁶⁴⁻⁶⁶ envisages an enlarged and greatly strengthened national agency equipped to provide effective library leadership, supplementary materials and services, and federal grants-in-aid in a variety of forms, including grants for regional library service. Garceau⁶⁷ concludes, however, “. . . despite the compelling logic of Louis Round Wilson’s *Geography of Reading*, there is no state in the union which could not today easily meet ALA’s standards for public libraries.” He suggests, therefore, federal grants-in-aid to state library agencies for administration, rather than for demonstration of county or regional library services, with a second type of federal grant to cooperating research libraries for the purpose of building a national network of coordinated research facilities. Leigh appears to accept the validity of federal grants to public libraries if administered by state library agencies for purposes of stimulation rather than equalization, but adds, “A more fundamental type of Federal participation in public library development in the years ahead is by leadership and financial support of the country’s research library and bibliographical facilities.”⁶⁸

For the next decade at least the trends in the development of county and regional library services would appear to be toward creation of large multicounty libraries by consolidation, federation, or contract; the organization of metropolitan library areas by federation, contract, and occasionally by consolidation; and the further development of state-regional centers for the provision of supplementary library services to local municipal, county, and multicounty libraries. Munn⁶⁹ expresses some doubt about the state-regional office being the answer for all forty-eight states, and suggests waiting for evidence from present experiments in Vermont, Massachusetts, Missouri, and New York. Meanwhile present county and regional librarians should derive much help from the references already cited, and from such summaries of discussion and experience as *Reaching Readers*⁷⁰ and Schenk’s forthcoming manual.⁷¹

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